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SUBJECT: Would You Go on Holiday in Belarus?

¶1. (U) Summary: President Lukashenko decided this year that tourism in Belarus must increase, and the GOB issued a number of new laws to ensure that it does. Lukashenko also wants stricter enforcement of hunting legislation. Agro and eco tourism are slowly taking off in rural regions, but those involved are cautious of a lack of legal regulation. End Summary.

New Regulations, Fewer Tourism Agencies  
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¶2. (U) One of Lukashenko's new ideas is to attract more foreign tourists and to "encourage" Belarusians to travel in Belarus rather than abroad. In April, he noted that eight times more Belarusians travel abroad than tourists come to Belarus, a ratio that is disadvantageous to the economy. Therefore, on June 29, the House of Representatives passed the National Tourism Development Program for 2006-2010, aimed at increasing inbound tourism revenues 30 times to USD 377.2 million (from a current USD 21.5 million) and the number of tourists visiting Belarus from the current 67,500 a year to 114,300 a year. The program focuses on the development of tourist infrastructure, especially on agricultural, environmental, transit and water tourism.

¶3. (U) In February, the Ministry of Sports and Tourism (MST) introduced obligatory certification for licensed tourism agencies operating in Belarus. All agencies must obtain certification from the National Tourism Agency (NTA) or the State Institute for Standardization and Certification by January 1, 2006 or risk fines and the suspension of their licenses. The two-week certification process costs tourism agencies between USD 140 and 370 each, and involves certification agents inspecting tourist agencies' offices, staff competency and compliance with paperwork requirements. The MST plans to introduce similar requirements for tour guides to ensure that they "cultivate patriotic feelings in Belarus' residents." According to Sergei Dorinin of the MST, only those agencies who support the authorities' initiatives and promote Belarusian tourism will be allowed to operate in Belarus.

¶4. (U) As of July 1, tourist agencies must comply with new licensing provisions regulating inbound tourism services, including arranging tours to Belarus for foreign tourists and having an incoming tourism contract with a foreign partner. Violations of licensing regulations include

provision of services without contracts, activity by branches of a travel agent not listed in the license, and insufficient inbound tourism services. All agencies must provide their tourism statistics to the MST within six months of obtaining a license. In accordance with these new rules, agencies had to amend their licenses by September 1. On September 6, the MST reported that it revoked the licenses of 179 of 700 tourist agencies for failure to complete the amendment process.

15. (SBU) Valeria Klitsunova, chairwoman of the Association of Agro and Ecotourism, recently criticized government policies regulating the tourist industry in a meeting with poloffs. The NTA says that there are no incoming tourist minimums, but on July 8, Klitsunova noted that ten percent of agencies' business must now come from foreign tourists. She said that even though the GOB wants to control and boost tourism, it is unwilling to invest to promote tourism and frequently passes laws without consulting experts. Klitsunova pointed out that visa regulations and border crossings must be simplified before more tourists will come from abroad. She considers every foreign national in Belarus to be a tourist because they spend money in the service sector, whereas the GOB counts only those who come on tourist visas.

#### Hunting

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16. (U) Hunting in Belarus is not strictly regulated, and, according to the website of national tour operator Belintourist, there is no limit on the quantity of game for foreign tourists or the number of guns and ammunition that tourists can bring into Belarus. The website advertises the chance to kill elk, deer, boars, wolves, red foxes, hares and many types of bird. Prices vary based on killing or wounding the animal, on the animal's gender, age and size, as well as on if tourists kill the animal by ambush, in an enclosure or on approach, and on if it is mating season. [Note: hunting rates can be found at [http://www.belintourist.by/www.belintourist.by/tours\\_en.phtml,8,,x23Ftopic=2hunting](http://www.belintourist.by/www.belintourist.by/tours_en.phtml,8,,x23Ftopic=2hunting)]

17. (U) On July 22, Lukashenko declared that punishment for poaching offences should be as tough as possible and announced that, "all those who take a carbine, a gun, an automatic weapon or a rifle, run to the forest and shoot indiscriminately at anything that moves, killing not only animals but also people, will be held fully accountable". On August 2, he dismissed chiefs of the Audit Department and of the Wildlife Preserves and Nature Management Department and the deputy chief of the Presidential Property Department for failing to stop hunting violations at Braslav National Park. Former director of the park Petr Karnitski faces criminal charges for leaving the hunting and fishing seasons open all year and not charging visitors for services. Lukashenko fired Director of Polesse Radiological Reserve Petr Politatyev for similar reasons.

#### Agrotourism

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18. (SBU) Klitsunova described Lukashenko's latest pet project for the tourism industry: agrotourism. Her organization works with people in small villages who wish to operate bed and breakfast type facilities for tourists, providing produce from their gardens. As people already own the home, agro tourism involves little investment risk and is beneficial to everyone involved. Many hosts offer guests typical Belarusian experiences, such as berry-picking, mushroom collecting, touring local historical sites or even skinning rabbits and killing pigs. The problem with encouraging these small businesses is the lack of legislation on agrotourism. Klitsunova suggested making a simple, straightforward set of laws to protect the homeowners. For example, if people rent out less than five rooms in their home, they should not have to pay taxes on the income. If they rent out more, they should register as

a business. She admitted that the service industry is poor, there is little promotion or advertising, and the tricky legal system discourages involvement in tourism. [Note: the UNDP recently looked into rural tourism in Belarus and plans to publish a booklet listing all agrotourism estates. The UNDP also intends to organize training sessions in Poland and the Czech Republic for Belarusian landowners interested in agrotourism. See septel for a more detailed assessment of agrotourism.]

#### Ecotourism

¶9. (SBU) On August 4, Dr. Valentin Yatsukhna, head of the landscape ecology lab of the geography faculty at the Belarusian State University, described ecotourism in the national parks and lakes regions to poloff. Dr. Yatsukhna's team is preparing a proposal for the future development of the Braslav National Park in northern Belarus. The proposal focuses on the development of ecologically friendly tourism within recreational zones, including paths and tours to disperse tourists throughout the park, instead of concentrating all activity on a central point. Yatsukhna described three bus tours that show tourists historical monuments in addition to lakes, forests and marshlands. If the MST approves these plans, the team will provide printed materials in Russian and English to National Park staff and train guides to give the tours.

¶10. (SBU) Yatsukhna stressed the importance of avoiding the industrialization of the region, arguing that large hotels negatively impact the environment and that small guesthouses are better. He hopes to model development on American examples of this and other ecologically friendly tourist activities that he observed on a recent USG-sponsored tour of U.S. national parks.

Comment

¶11. (SBU) Forcing already registered and licensed companies to become certified, at a sizeable cost, is simply another example of government pressure on private business and provides a perfect opportunity for the GOB to close privately owned tourist agencies. Belarus' abundant and relatively untrampled nature does provide considerable tourism potential, especially for city-weary Europeans. However, that potential will remain unrealized as long as the service industry is minimally developed; Belarus is famous internationally only for its reputation as Europe's last dictatorship, and the cost and hassle of visas and transport is high.

PHLIPOT